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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7929

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RHMFSS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001935

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PKK SUCCEEDING IN DRIVING WEDGE BETWEEN TURKS AND KURDS IN SOUTHEAST

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Eric F. Green, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (U) This is a Consulate Adana cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: During one week of meetings in southeastern Turkey, PolOff met with political figures, writers and NGOs to discuss the Kurdish issue, growing regional tension, and upcoming local elections. Contacts said the PKK is using the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) to escalate tension, with continued protests to invoke Kurdish sympathy and garner votes in an upcoming election it considers a means to legitimize its mandate as well to settle a score against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Part of the PKK's strategy is maintaining its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan's exclusive position as symbolic leader of the Kurds. Kurds are divided on both defining the Kurdish problem and agreeing on a solution, and most would support an alternate to both AKP, which hopes to dilute them with Islam, and DTP, which continues to espouse violence. The AKP government must address this issue more dispassionately and with greater sensitivity if it does not want violence to spiral. End summary.

PKK's Election Strategy: Divide and Conquer

¶3. (C) Yilmaz Akinci, a Kurdish freelance writer and al-Jazeera correspondent, has interviewed on numerous occasions PKKers in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq, and has lived in Diyarbakir for much of his life. He told us the PKK still controls the city in large part, and is driving DTP's election strategy of ratcheting up and sustaining societal tension to further polarize the Kurds, and ensuring it is closed down by the Constitutional Court. The PKK, still strong and meeting its recruiting goals, is banking on ethnic fidelity to deliver the Kurdish vote in the Southeast, in particular in battleground cities like Diyarbakir, Van and Siirt. Akinci believes the PKK sees the election as a way to repudiate the July 2007 election results (when the AKP won 55% of the votes in the region) and show the emptiness of the AKP's promises on the Kurdish issue and so-called defiance of the military establishment. Not all PKK tactics are supported across the board in the region, however. According to Akinci, the decision to close retail shops during Prime Minister Erdogan's visit, which was portrayed as a

reflection of popular protest, was resented by businessmen, who complied out of fear of PKK reprisals. Akinci said a DTP political contact told him their plan is to continue mounting high-profile protests at least once every 15 days in order to prolong the airing of their primary grievances: the GOT's continued denial of the Kurdish reality and lack of progress on it, Ocalan's confinement conditions and treatment, the lack of Kurdish-language education and freedom of expression, and the GOT's resistance to granting an amnesty to PKK fighters.

¶4. (C) DTP Provincial Chairman Necdet Atalay argued the passion displayed on the street is organic and comes from the years of pain and humiliation suffered by the Kurds. He said the AKP and media were playing "dirty politics" by portraying the demonstrations as DTP's election ploy, and indicated it was yet another way to sweep the Kurdish issue under the rug. Kurds were appalled by the insensitivity of the government to Kurdish outrage about Ocalan's inhumane treatment; instead of opening an inquiry as DTP requested, Atalay said, the Ministry of Justice issued a "hasty and empty" statement dismissing the allegations. He acknowledged that DTP closure would create short-term rage that would generate votes (for a successor party), but denied that was their aim, noting how harmful it would be for Turkey's already imperfect democracy. According to Atalay, it's time for the government to pay attention as Kurdish rage has reached a level not seen since the aftermath of Ocalan's capture in 1999 and he warned ominously that DTP could only do so much to keep it from boiling over the

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"control point." Former Diyarbakir sub-mayor Abdullah Demirbas argued AKP had already sabotaged itself among Kurds with its close alliance with the military, approval of "murderous" cross-border operations, and corruption scandals like Deniz Feneri. Why would DTP need ploys to win votes in the face of these outrages? To hone the point, he said Diyarbakir's AKP members of Parliament hadn't visited the city in "a long time" because they were ashamed of their own affiliation with these issues.

Only One Kurdish Superstar Allowed

¶5. (C) Kurdish writer Altan Tan observed that behind the PKK's election strategy is the principle of "no charisma allowed." That is, no one leader should emerge to rival or challenge the cult of personality and leadership represented by Ocalan. (A week earlier, Adana PO met with an AKP parliamentarian of Kurdish descent who echoed this sentiment, claiming the DTP may not nominate Diyarbakir incumbent mayor Osman Baydemir because the PKK is uncomfortable with his high level of popularity.) Tan emphasized this by pointing out that none of Diyarbakir's DTP parliamentarians actually come from the province. Ocalan's personality cult is also rubbing against the ambitions of KRG President Barzani, who Tan said aspires to be viewed as the symbolic leader of all Kurds. This ambition, according to Tan, is one of the reasons Barzani resists ridding northern Iraq of PKKers. Barzani knows that being responsible for Kurd-on-Kurd violence would destroy his reputation. Now, while the PKK does not recognize him as their leader, it still depends on him for protection.

What Kind of Solution? Whose Solution?

¶6. (C) Akinci faulted Kurdish activists for misunderstanding the political approach needed to resolve the Kurdish issue. The demand by many for the release of Ocalan as part of a solution to the Kurdish problem, for

example, was a ridiculous nonstarter. The GOT would never come to the negotiating table with that on the agenda) but the PKK knows that, which suggests it does not want a solution. Akinci held that the PKK reflex for revenge combined with the military's tunnel vision on the Kurdish issue create an insurmountable obstacle to finding a peaceful solution. Tan went even further, claiming neither the military nor the PKK want a solution as they are each other's *raison d'etre*. The PKK is working with the Deep State, and the Deep State in turn uses the PKK to maintain its dominion and the status quo. He pointed to a pattern of increased terrorist attacks whenever Turkey takes positive steps forward on the EU accession process, or democratization.

The Third Way

¶7. (C) Tan proposed a "third way" to win approval from the vast majority of the Kurdish population (neither radical nor assimilated) who simply want an end to all violence, expanded identity, cultural and linguistic rights, and to live in a true Turkish democracy. These pious Kurds neither want their identity subsumed under AKP's religious and social assimilation plan, nor to be dragged into more violent conflict by the PKK and DTP. Tan recognized, however, that a leader to harness this voter base does not exist right now. Such a leader, he acknowledged, would need to balance several characteristics: Kurdish, but with a Turkish pedigree; pious, but liberal; an intellectual, but not a socialist.

Comment

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¶8. (C) Our contacts unanimously agreed the DTP's recent escalation of street protests and displays of civil disobedience point to the PKK's intention to polarize society along ethnic lines with a view to resuscitating ethnic allegiance among Kurds who voted for AKP in July ¶2007. Whether the tactic is increasing the DTP's popularity remains to be seen, but thus far the GOT seems to be taking the bait with its dismissive statements about Ocalan's well-being, using excessive force to restrain protesters, and continuing to subject DTP and NGO leaders to lawsuits and prosecutions. Statements by Prime Minister Erdogan, such as condoning the behavior of an angry nationalist who threatened pro-Kurdish protesters with a rifle and suggested some citizens should leave the country if they don't like it here, play into the "us vs. them" mentality the PKK hopes to intensify. If AKP wants to win hearts, minds and votes in the Southeast, it needs to become more savvy -- and sensitive -- in dealing with the Kurdish issue.

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